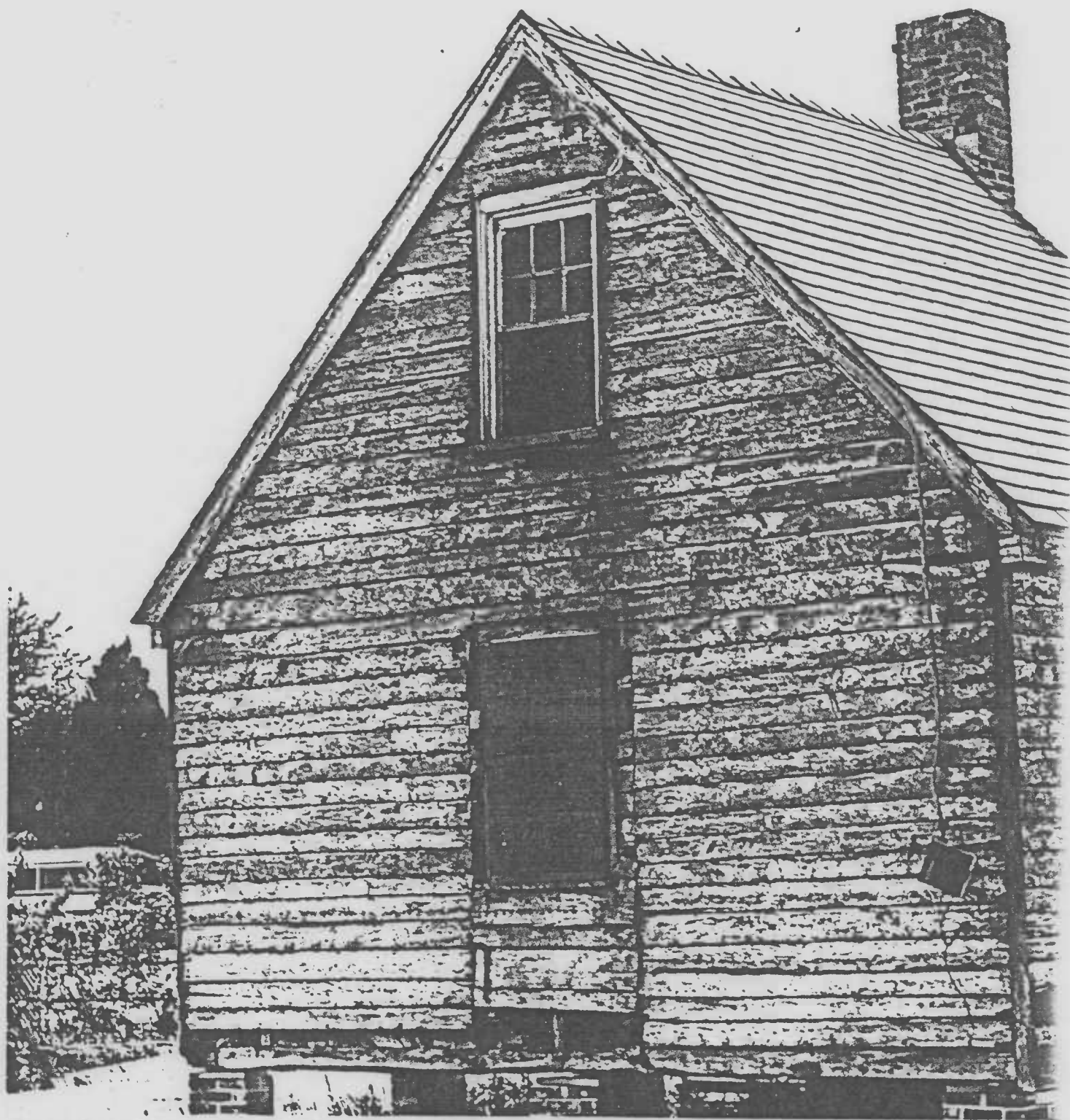


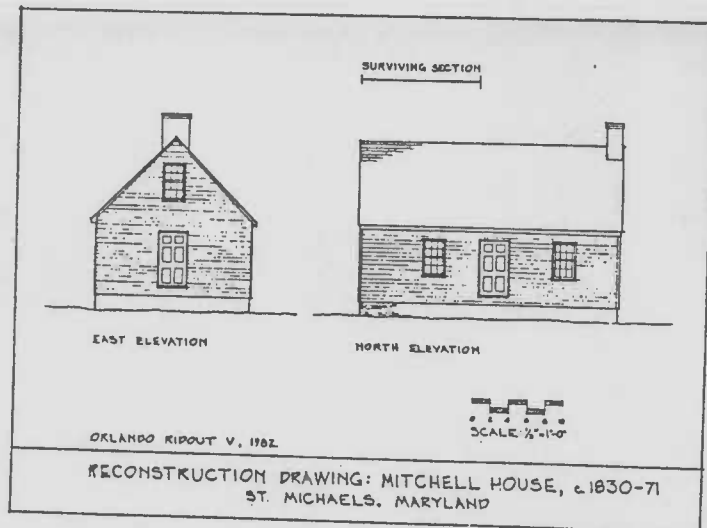
T-490

Mitchell House
St. Michael's, Maryland

The Mitchell House



The Mitchell House, now located at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Watermen's Village, is typical of southern Maryland black tenant houses. After moving the Mitchell House, the museum commissioned architectural historian Orlando Ridout to analyze it. He determined that the surviving structure was originally part of a hall-and-parlor residence, shown in his conjectural reconstruction drawing (see inset). All photographs with this article are courtesy of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.



A Maryland museum combines history and architecture to tell the story of a 19th-century black family

BY SANDRA BUCHMAN

To make room for his new home, a St. Michaels, Maryland, landowner decided the ramshackled structure cluttering his property had to go.

The building in question was a small, one-and-a-half story frame dwelling, with one room downstairs and a loft above. Located on Lee Street, it was like many old houses in St. Michaels and similar to southern Maryland tenant houses.

In a different part of town, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum was planning Watermen's Village, a collection of artifacts and buildings interpreting local culture and focusing on the oyster industry and its regional development in the 19th century. To add to the planned exhibit, the museum bought the Lee Street house in 1981 and moved it to the museum grounds to prevent its demolition.

Architectural sleuthing

Like a lot of "surprise package" purchasers, the museum staff members waited until they got back home to really look at what they had bought. The museum received funds from the Maryland State Arts Council to bring in Orlando Ridout, an architectural historian now with the Maryland Historical Trust. Ridout started examining the house in detail. At the same time, two students, Michael Blake and Constance Cummings, poured through land transfers, manuscript records, and newspaper accounts to research the house's history.

They began to suspect what would later, after detailed analysis and

research, prove to be true: the house was not, architecturally or historically, what it seemed.

Ridout dated the original construction from 1815 to 1840, but the details and proportions of the house seemed odd. Though the museum had moved only the main structure, the house previously had a lean-to with an exterior chimney and hearth. The lean-to had evidently been added some years after the original construction.

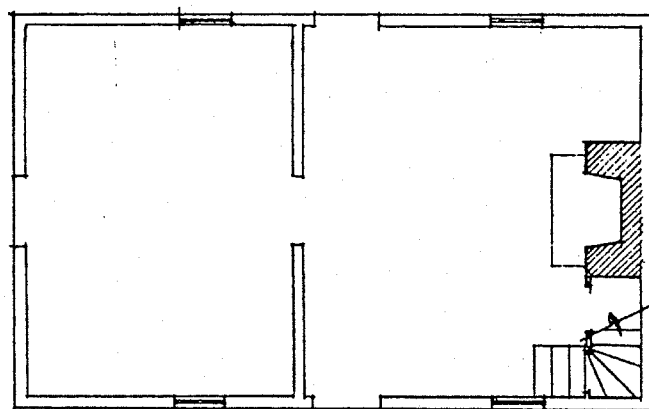
As Ridout removed the interior plywood paneling, he saw that the gable wall, where the chimney had stood, was different from the other walls. The northeast and southeast corners had heavy down braces, unlike the northwest or southwest corners. He also found that the exterior siding was neatly hand-shaped to fit against the studs on three walls, but did not fit the studs on the gable end.

From this and other evidence, Ridout concluded that the original structure was not a simple one-room-plan house, but the parlor section of a hall-and-parlor house, originally more than twice its present size. Built at another location, the structure was moved to the Lee Street site, and the gable end was then sided with materials salvaged from the original hall. The original house also had a continuous brick foundation enclosing a cellar—a rare find in the low-lying waterfront town where the water table is only a few feet below ground.

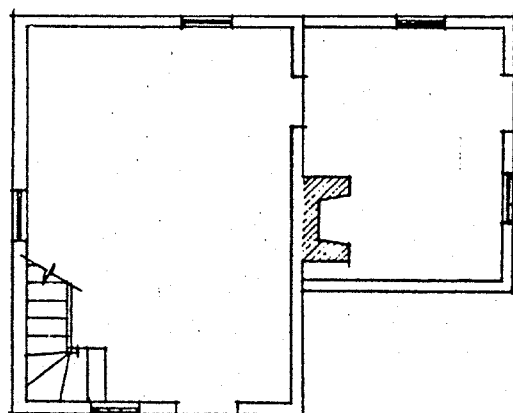
Searching for evidence

Blake and Cummings located land transfers that traced the Lee Street lot to Peter and Eliza Bailey Mitchell, who purchased it in 1871. Eliza was the sister of noted abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and there is evidence that, though separated during childhood,

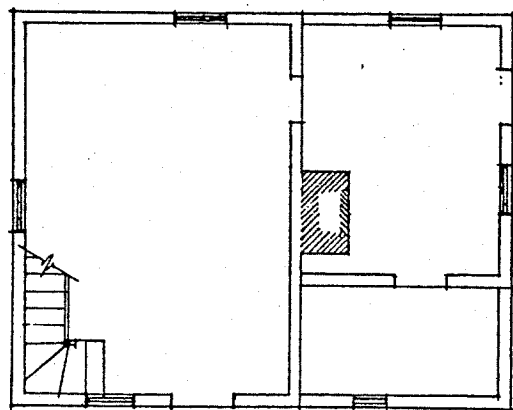
Sandra Buchman is curator of collections at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland.



c. 1830s - c. 1871



c. 1871 - c. 1930



c. 1930 - 1981

ORLANDO RIDOUT V, 1982.

CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION DRAWING
MITCHELL HOUSE
ST. MICHAEL'S, MARYLAND

they occasionally saw each other. Once when Douglass spoke in Baltimore, Eliza made the 60-mile trip to see her brother. Though Frederick Douglass was in St. Michaels from 1833 to 1836, it is not known if he visited his sister at the house. Douglass later worked for abolition in England and in New York, while Eliza and her family worked for their freedom, gaining it in 1836 before Douglass officially received his.

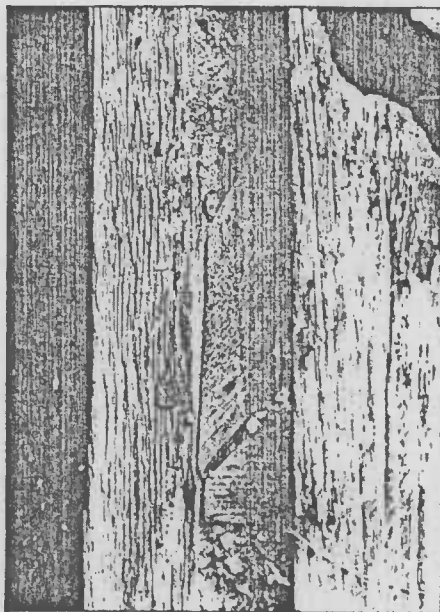
Before the Mitchells' ownership, the lot was part of an adjoining plantation, Perry Cabin Farm, owned by John Needles Hambleton. When John Needles Hambleton died, he specified that 24 one-acre lots be sold for \$80 each. He also left bequests to James Mitchell, "my faithful manager," and Peter Mitchell, a long-time worker. Both brothers had worked on Perry Cabin Farm for many years as slaves and, since the 1830s, as freedmen.

Hambleton's reasons for parceling and pricing his land as he did, and for his bequests, are unknown. He was, however, a staunch supporter of the Union and may have felt he could go against the strong Confederate sentiment in the area by making land available to men he knew and trusted.

The structure's historical and architectural dates are separated by at least 30 years. Through architectural evidence, Ridout proved the house had been moved to the Lee Street site, but the original location of the house remains unknown. There are, however, a few clues.

It is possible the Mitchell House was the residence of Peter and Eliza and their children before their official purchase of the lot in 1871. It is also possible the house was moved at the time of the land transfer. In 1865, Frederick Douglass' son, Lewis, visited his cousins and Aunt Eliza Bailey Mitchell living "a little more than half a mile from St. Michaels towards Captain Auld's place on what is called the country road." This is an accurate description of the Lee Street area. In a letter to his father, Lewis Douglass described the Mitchells' lives. He wrote of the blacks' difficulty in obtaining land and how most earned little as farm hands, though some earned quite a bit in the booming oyster industry.

Peter and Eliza Mitchell left the property to their children. The portion with the house went to Peter Mitchell Jr., and it is at this point the house and lot come together in historical and architectural fact.



The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum moved the Mitchell House to its grounds in 1981 after dismantling it and carefully numbering its parts, like the stud shown above.

In Watermen's Village

Through the museum's commitment to the Mitchell House, it adopted the legacy of a black family who gained its freedom in 1836, whose children became farmers and watermen, and whose direct descendant, James Thomas, is a respected businessman in St. Michaels today.

The Mitchell House will be an integral part of the museum's Watermen's Village, which will explore the 19th-century oyster industry in the Chesapeake Bay region.

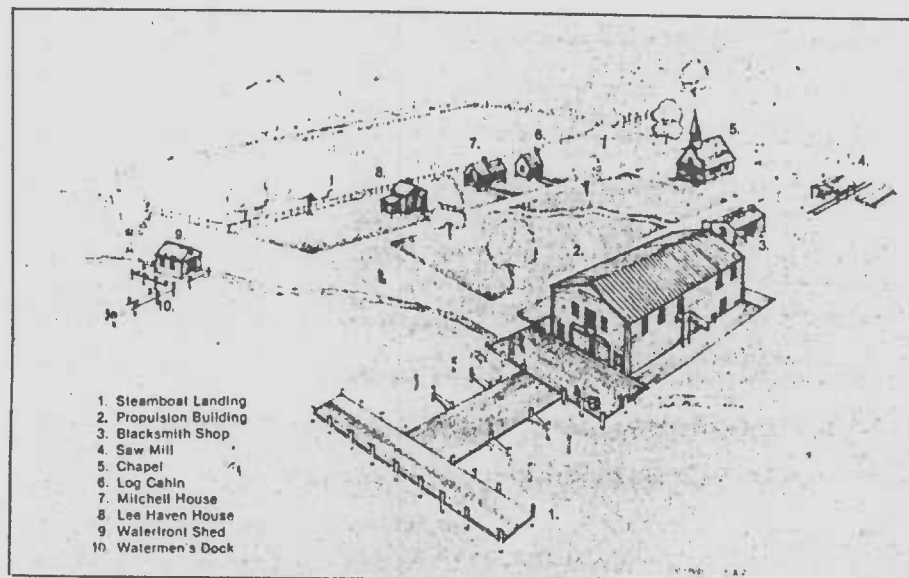
This industry created a unique and all-pervasive culture in St. Michaels, providing jobs for blacks and whites and bringing prosperity to many. Boat building flourished as it had not since the War of 1812. Shuckers, canners, ropemakers, sailmakers, sailors, and captains were employed in newly opened canning plants and shipping firms. Towns grew around the rail and steamboat connections that had begun to ship seafood to Maryland's western shore and the Midwest. Whole towns sprang from the oyster industry, and, by 1880, not a single resident of Maryland's eastern shore was unaffected.

The Mitchell family story shows this history. After gaining his freedom in mid-century, John Mitchell, son of Peter and Eliza, was an oysterman by 1870. His was not an isolated case. George Brown Goode's 1887 study of U.S. fisheries reported one-third of all Maryland oyster tongs were black.

The Mitchell House will be used as a cultural and historical artifact in the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Watermen's Village. The story of the Mitchell family will be explored for its own drama, and as an example of a typical 19th-century black family of the Chesapeake Bay region.

Joining the Mitchell House in Watermen's Village are a tenant house, circa 1870, and a log dwelling that may date from the 18th century. The Mitchell House is currently being restored through a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Maritime Division.

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At Watermen's Village, the Mitchell House will be used to interpret the life of a typical 19th-century black family of the region.

History News

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THREE DOLLARS



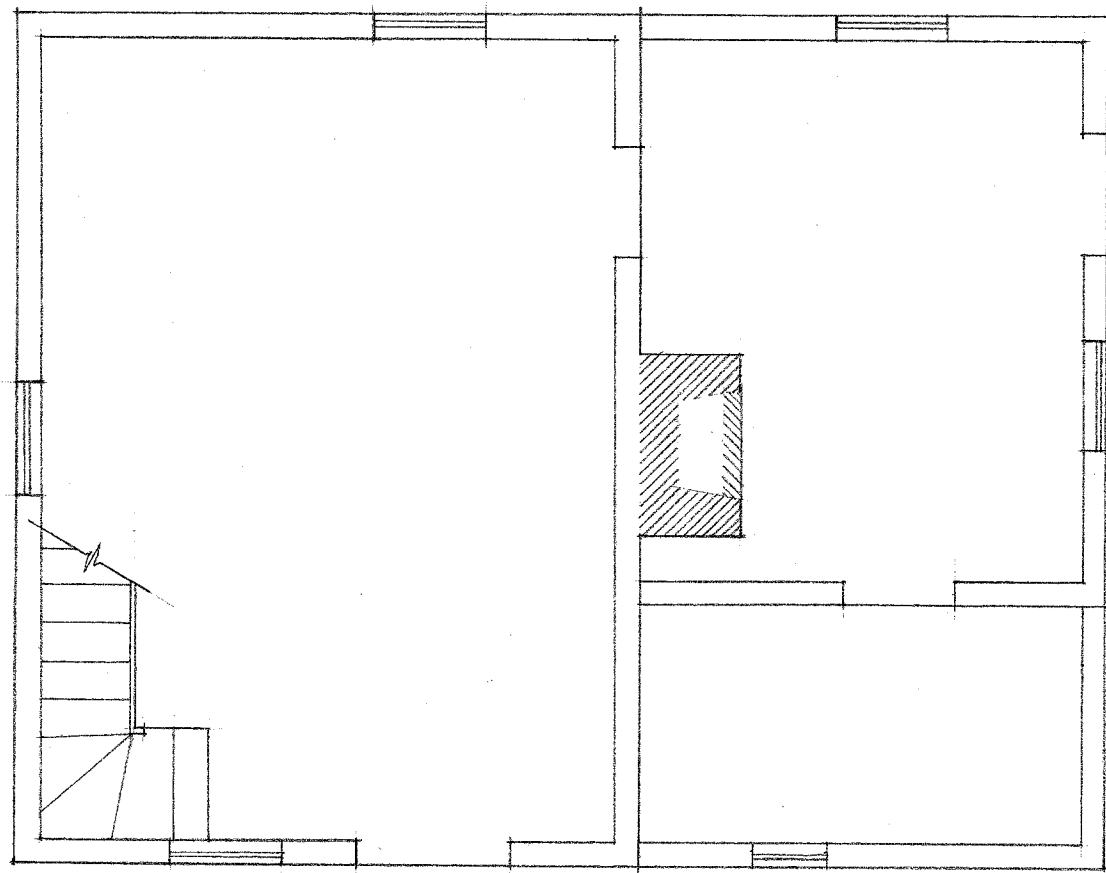
BLACK HISTORY MONTH:

Midwesterners collect
black women's history

Maryland museum adds
new dimension to its
interpretation

PLUS:

How to restore
windmills



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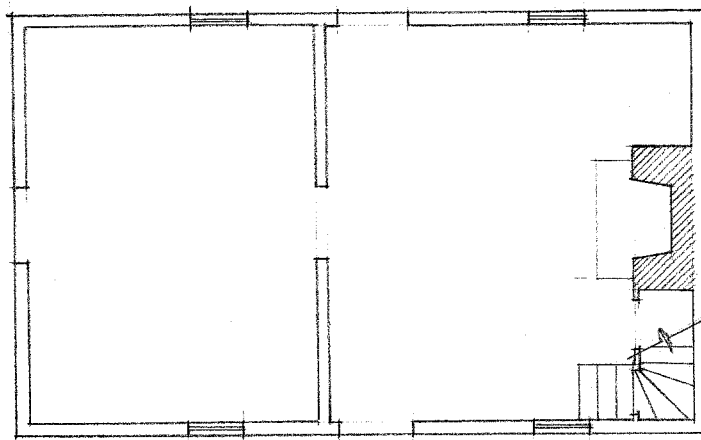
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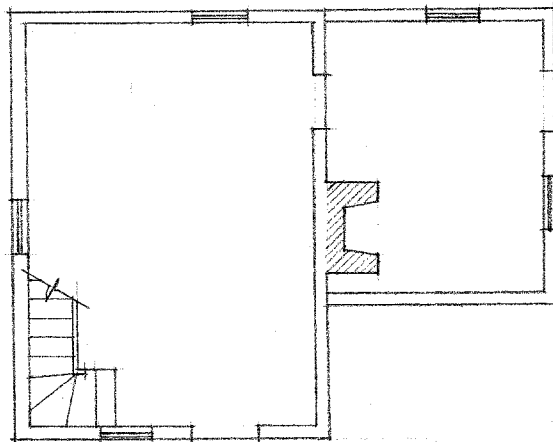
MITCHELL HOUSE

ST. MICHAEL'S, MARYLAND

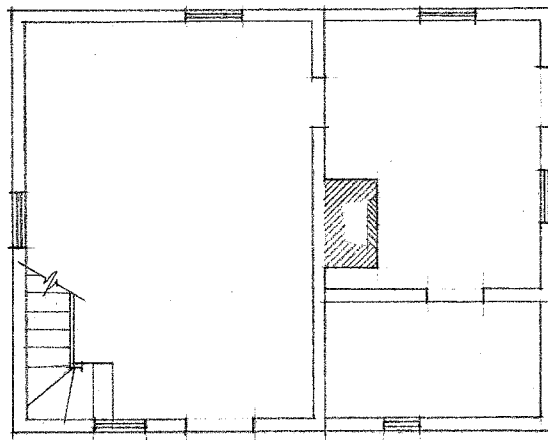
JULY 14, 1981.



c. 1830s - c. 1871



c. 1871 - c. 1930

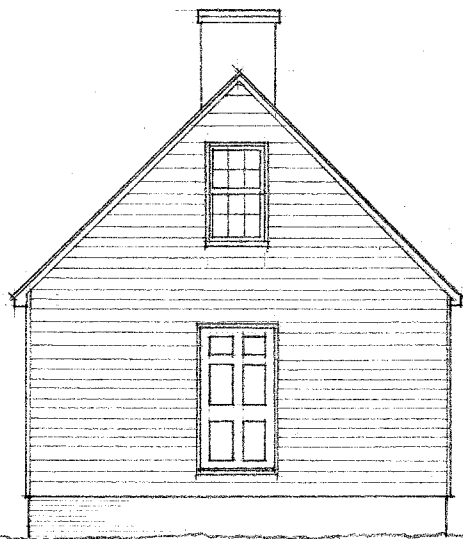


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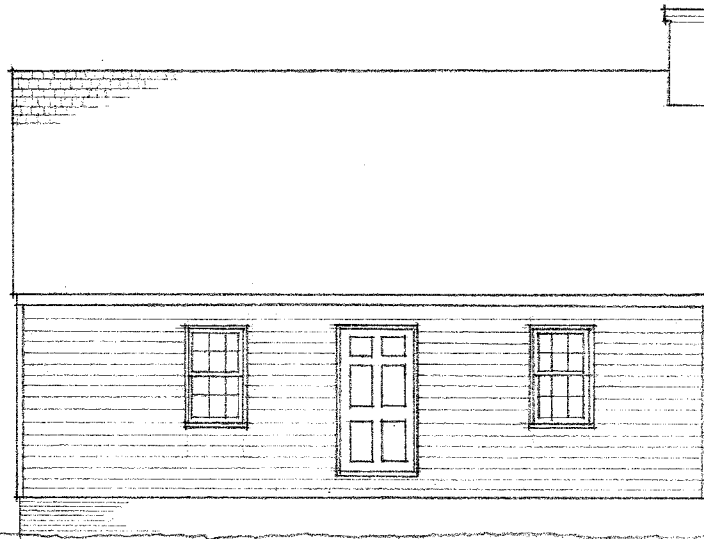
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CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION DRAWING
MITCHELL HOUSE
ST. MICHAEL'S, MARYLAND

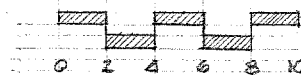
SURVIVING SECTION



EAST ELEVATION



NORTH ELEVATION



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ORLANDO RIDOUT V, 1982.

RECONSTRUCTION DRAWING: MITCHELL HOUSE, c. 1830-71
ST. MICHAELS, MARYLAND



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Mitchell House

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T-490 Mitchell House
St. Michaels, MD

Photographs taken by Maritime Museum staff
after house was moved to museum grounds.

Photos probably by Peter Gideon,
Spring / Summer 1981.



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T-490 Mitchell House
St Michaels, MD

Photos taken by Maritime Museum staff
after house move to museum.

Primarily by Peter Gibson, Spring / Summer 1981.



T-490 Mitchell House
St. Michaels, MD

Chimney in lean-to addition
prior to demolition of lean-to
& move of house to Maritime
Museum. C. 1980-81.

Photo probably by Peter Gideon
of museum staff.



T-490

Mitchell House

St. Michaels Maritime Museum

West gable wall after move and
construction of new chimney.

Jim Lally May 1983

may 1983